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Never again: Brad Miller on Darfur

BY BOB GEARY

Thursday night, Congressman Brad Miller was at Pullen Baptist Church in Raleigh talking about Darfur. The day before, Miller had told the Charlotte Observer he might run against Elizabeth Dole for her Senate seat next year. A lot of Democrats were excited by it. I was thinking political column. So I went.

I've never written anything about Darfur. Truth to tell, I'd managed not to learn much about it beyond the general charge of genocide made against the government of Sudan. Genocide. You hear the word enough, you can tune it out. I had.

But Miller hadn't. He went to Darfur in a group with House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer just weeks after being appointed to the Foreign Affairs Committee. A third-term member, and in the majority following the '06 elections, Democrat Miller is now allowed to serve on three committees, not just the two previously available under the Republicans.

For 90 minutes, Miller talked in riveting detail about the horrors there, and also about the horror of America's shriveled influence in the world, which makes the situation all the more agonizing for someone raised to believe, with Jack Kennedy, that our country should pay any price, bear any burden, to advance the cause of freedom. But with our nation's moral authority gone, and our military therefore useless even were it not completely exhausted, what burden can we even imagine taking up in Darfur?

And yet, as Miller said, history will judge us harshly for doing nothing about the genocide in Rwanda; but it will be unforgiving if, after saying "never again" a decade ago, we once again do nothing in Darfur.

So this is a political column after all. As I listened, I decided that our almost instinctive impulse to use military force—Miller's impulse and mine—is wrong in general and would be virtually impossible anyway where, as Miller said, the situation pits the Arab Muslims who run Sudan against the African (black) Muslims who are their victims.

America simply cannot be seen by the rest of the world patrolling the skies of, or landing troops in, another Muslim country. Not without U.N. sanction anyway, which the Chinese absolutely oppose. So humanitarian aid is the only tool we have.

I decided one other thing. I could no more imagine Liddy Dole performing in public the way Brad Miller did at Pullen than I could see her admitting that the Bush administration has been a disaster in every conceivable way. Dole doesn't see any mistakes, or at least she doesn't admit them. She's put her energies, since getting elected to the Senate, into Republican politics and nothing else, including fronting the National Republican Senatorial Committee. If she has ever gotten up in front of a small interfaith group and openly agonized about a world problem, as Brad Miller did Thursday, and literally begged the group for their ideas on how to move forward, well—but Republicans like to deal in certainties, not complexities. And Dole, the couple of times I've encountered her, can't stand to be questioned, let alone question herself out in the open.

And Miller? He's a soul-searcher who can't help but show it.

A Miller-Dole campaign would offer about as sharp a contrast as you could hope for, not merely between Democrats' policies and Republicans', but between the real, awful issues we face as Americans and the cosmetic unreality of the way we've managed to avoid facing up to them for too many years.

Bring that on.

Miller's fervent talk caused me to seek out a documentary about Darfur shown at the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival in Durham. The Devil Came on Horseback is about a young ex-Marine, Capt. Brian Steidle, who volunteers for duty in Darfur with an African Union monitoring force. He's armed only with a camera and a notepad. He can't stop the killing. He's not even supposed to say what he thinks about it.

But when Steidle comes home, and does speak out, he's shocked to discover how little Americans have been told about Darfur by their leaders. The systematic killing, burning, raping and child slaughter perpetrated by the Sudanese government are all lost in the Bush administration's unreality, despite several hundred thousand dead and 1 million or more living in refugee camps—out of a population of 7 million.

In the film, Darfurians tell how they believe in America, and that America will save them. I strongly recommend it if you get a chance to see it. It convinced me that, with or without U.N. sanction, we should indeed put our troops on the ground as peacekeepers—the same troops we never should have put into Iraq.

(For more information, see www.savedarfur.org, www.globalgrassroots.org and www.threegenerations.org.)

Speaking of Iraq, real American hero Ray McGovern will speak Wednesday, April 25, at the awards dinner of N.C. Peace Action. McGovern was a career CIA analyst who helped create Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity, which has challenged Bush's war insanity and misuse of intelligence data from the get-go. Now McGovern's challenging congressional Democrats to do the right thing and cut off war funding. The event starts at 6 p.m. at the NCSU Faculty Club, 4200 Hillsborough St., Raleigh. Tickets: 469-0831.